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ABSTRACT

A content analysis identified the issues discussed by 39 advisors (mostly white faculty and administrators) with two cohorts of black freshmen at Towson State University (TSU), Maryland. Advisees were 95 black females and 40 black males in two freshmen classes. Advisors met with each subject at least once every 2 weeks and kept a record of issues discussed. Students completed a "Student Satisfaction Questionnaire" during both fall and spring semesters. Findings indicated that some social issues were not talked about due to student reluctance to initiate these discussions, especially when related to race. Financial aid was also rarely discussed. Topics discussed were grouped into the following categories: registration/scheduling, selection of major and major area advising, course advisement, on/off campus employment, referral to other services on campus, issues surrounding enrollment at TSU, living conditions/personal issues, extracurricular activities, financial questions, retention program issues, and questionnaires and standardized tests. Topics most frequently discussed were course advisement, referral to other services, and registration and scheduling. (DB)

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ADVISING TOPICS: A CONTENT ANALYSIS

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Running Head: **ADVISING TOPICS**

ABSTRACT

A content analysis of advisors' (mostly white faculty and administrators) reported issues discussed with two cohorts of black freshmen revealed academic service and advising issues. Advisee validation and discussion indicated that some social issues may not be discussed due to student reluctance to initiate these discussions, especially when related to race. The paper presents the broad categories of information advisors may need to know to prepare for conversations with advisees.

ADVISING TOPICS: A CONTENT ANALYSIS

Growing concern over student attrition at colleges and universities has resulted in numerous attempts to identify causes and provide strategies to combat this escalating problem. The proportion of students who leave postsecondary institutions is directly related to the selectivity of entrance requirements. An average of twenty percent of students who enter institutions which require a minimum combined Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) score of 1200 fail to graduate after five years. At the extreme, less selective colleges which have open admissions policies, have been faced with a loss of approximately seventy-two percent of a cohort after the same interval of time (Austin, 1987). Acknowledging a concern about student attrition, during the past two decades, institutions have focused on increasing the numbers of students who remain in school.

Increasing student retention has proved to be a difficult goal because of its multivariate nature. A number of factors may contribute either to a student's desire to leave or remain in school. For example, off-campus employment for more than 20 hours may correlate negatively with persistence, (Austin, 1975) while part-time campus employment may enhance the development of good academic skills (Hammes & Haller, 1983). Bella and Huba (1982) studied the effect of on-campus work of less than 20 hours (part-

time) on the academic performance of freshmen (N=470), sophomores (N=816) and juniors (N=1020) at Iowa State University. No significant differences were found among the students who worked in work-study, food services or non-need based university jobs. In addition, there was no difference seen in the academic performance of students who either received financial aid and/or worked part-time, regardless of their type of job. Similarly, Hammes and Haller (1983) found no adverse academic effects of part-time work in a study of 300 randomly selected seniors at Cornell University.

Joining organizations on campus may enhance feelings of attachment to the campus while ethnic differences may predispose some students to feelings of alienation (Fleming, 1984). Additionally, students who commute to college may be unable to engage needed campus services. In contrast, residential living enhances students' accessibility of the library, counseling services, or advisors. Clearly, if past research holds true, many variables may affect each student's ability to leave or remain in school.

Postsecondary institutions have employed many strategies to improve students' graduation rates. Colleges' programs have targeted the prospective matriculants' high school academic preparation. Once in school, colleges have developed policies and programs to benefit students in the areas of financial aid, orientation, counseling, housing, and advising (Cristoffel, 1986).

In a 1982 study of 1600 college students, 66% of the participants reported negative feelings about the quality of academic advising, career counseling, and job placement. When these students were surveyed on their attitudes about college, the predominant number considered advising the most inadequate service. However, these same students reported that the caring attitudes of faculty and staff contributed to the majority of good feelings that they had about their college experience (Beal & Noel, 1980). Therefore, it follows that effective academic advising could be considered the most able mechanism for increasing retention rates (Forrest, 1982; Crockett, 1987). Advising programs may take different forms. Advising services may restrict their advice to the academic curriculum, while others may provide personal counseling in addition. On some campuses, faculty serve primarily as academic advisors while other professionals help students cope with personal problems. Informally, students may also advise other students on course selection and on handling college pressures. In fact, after most students have engaged a campus service, it is likely that their information will reach new freshmen long before the institution can provide assistance. Davila (1985) reported one entering Hunter College freshman's comment, "My friends help me with registration. I find out what I need and they tell me what to do (p. 15)."

Clear and reciprocal lines of communication between the advisor and the advisee can facilitate the fulfillment of students'

needs (Crockett, 1987). More importantly, if the advisor is equipped with correct information about other referral services, the advisee can be assisted to meet other than academic concerns. The advisor, therefore, is expected to be better prepared than the students about institutional requirements. Students, on the other hand, may be not only less prepared, but also unaware of the services on their campus. Hunter College determined that 40% of its students had no knowledge of eight of its thirty-one services (Davila, 1985). Once the students come to advisors for assistance, advisors help advisees assess and/or meet their needs. Accordingly, knowledge of the types of questions that the typical advisee asks could help the advisor in his or her responsibilities.

Studies on advising issues have primarily focused on data gathered from students using surveys. The purpose of this study was to determine the predominant categories of information discussed by academic advisors and first-time black freshman advisees during two successive fall semesters. Temporal and accurate descriptions of the topics of discussion can be gained through the written reports of advisors soon after meetings with advisees. Further validation of these issues by students will serve to assess the dialogue that occurred between advisor and advisee.

When the door closes on the advisor and the student, what are the questions and issues at the center of typical discussions? Certainly, the range of possible topics is great. Students may

come to advisors because of immediate concerns or be summoned to the advisors' offices to receive information relevant to their academic progress. Noel (1982) suggests that advisors should be trained and well-prepared about policies on registration, course selection, and service referral. Other authors have suggested that advisors be aware of drop and add dates, residency, major and basic skills requirements (Goldenberg, 1984); career, scholarship, internship (Kozloff, 1984); and student activities (Larsen & Brown, 1983). The complexity and variety of issues that an advisor may be expected to handle may differ from semester to semester as well as by institution (Habley, 1983).

In addition to the issues presented by most students, black students have cited problems concerning the quality of advice about programs and financial aid (Jacobs, 1981). Therefore, there is a need to determine the kind of information required by advisors who counsel black students. In this fashion, one institution's advisors could anticipate the specific informational needs of its students.

METHOD

Participants

Students: All first-time black freshmen entering in the fall semesters of 1986 (N=135) and 1987 (N=123) were invited to participate in a specially funded program which matched them with advisors.

During the first semester of the study, 95 females and 40 males were included who had an average age of 18 years. Their mean high school grade point average (GPA) was 2.87. Their average Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores were 419 and 438 for the verbal and mathematics sections, respectively. The statistics for black freshmen entering in the fall of 1987 were very similar to those noted one year earlier. The average high school GPA was 2.89 and the SAT verbal and math scores were 421 and 442, respectively. In addition, the most common majors of both years' entering black freshmen were business administration and accounting, with a large percentage (19% or 20%) who had not declared a major.

Advisors: Faculty and administrators were nominated to serve as advisors for the study by the Directors of Advising and Orientation, the Counseling and Tutorial Centers. Previous experience with a student-oriented program was the chief criterion for nomination. Nominees were invited to attend one of three sessions where the responsibilities and goals of the study were described.

Seven of the 18 faculty who served as advisors during the first year participated during the second year of the project. During the second year, five administrators also were selected as advisors. Three of these administrators had served as faculty members at some time. In total, 28 faculty and administrators served as advisors during the second year.

A wide range of academic departments were represented during

both years including the natural and mathematical sciences, humanities, business administration and education. A slightly higher proportion of males than females were represented during the second academic year; during the first year 44% of the advisors were male compared to 53% during the second year of the project. Black, White, and Asian or Indian faculty were represented in both samples, while all administrators were white.

Procedures

Students were first contacted about the program in September and August of the first and second years, respectively. Both years, the students were assigned to advisors during October because of a delay in the receipt of confirmation of funding. Their parents or nearest relative concurrently received letters detailing the intent of the program which was to improve retention through individualized advising. One hundred percent participation was assured by requiring all students to pick up their registration materials from their assigned advisors. During the second year, advising became a mandatory requisite for all students by vote of the University Senate. This requirement also boosted the regular participation of some of the black freshmen.

Advisors were selected in September and October. Regardless of the year of participation, each advisor was required to sign a contract stating specific responsibilities. Each advisor was to (a) contact their advisees by telephone or mail, (b) assist each advisee with academic self-assessment, (c) help students identify

and locate needed services, e.g. tutorial center, (d) encourage advisees to interact with the instructors and (e) serve as an example/role model. Advisors were provided with the telephone numbers and addresses of their advisees. The project director also mailed to the black students the name, department, office location, and campus telephone numbers of their advisors during October.

During the project's first year, advisors met with a maximum of eight students at least once very two weeks. These advisors received $1,300 in addition to their regular pay in compensation. There was a reduction in the number of black students seen by advisors from eight to five during the second year. Consequently, there was a reduction in the stipend to $500 during the second year.

Instruments

Monitoring forms: Forms were distributed to advisors listing the names of their advisees and blank spaces on which they were to indicate the dates the advisees were seen and the issues discussed. A sample entry was included on the form which listed a fictitious student, "John Doe" who met with the advisor on September 15 and 27 who "took exams in all but one class. Is passing with a C average. Suggested tutor for math." The "monitoring" forms were to be completed by advisors at the end of each month and returned to the project director. Reminders were mailed to the advisors who failed to turn in their forms after one month. The project director telephoned advisors who did not return their monitoring

forms after six weeks to request the form's completion and return.

Advisors were also provided with three surveys: The TASQ (Towson Advising Student Questionnaire) I, TASQ II, and the Self-Assessment Checklist. These surveys were developed by the Director of Orientation and Advising. The surveys were to assist the advisors in obtaining information about their advisees or as a tool for beginning discussion.

The Self-Assessment Checklist is a general list on which students rate their time management skills and reading comprehension. Similar to the Self-Assessment Checklist, in the TASQ I, students rate their academic skills and time demands on scales that range from one to ten. The TASQ II addressed students' satisfaction with campus activities.

During November of the fall and April of the spring semesters of the first year of the program, all participants were asked to complete the 16 item "Student Satisfaction Questionnaire". The questionnaire included statements about the frequency with which students addressed issues of advising, discrimination, faculty involvement and social life at Towson State. Students select a response from a Likert Scale: Always, Frequently, Sometimes, Seldom, Never.

Students were asked to identify themselves and assured that their identities would remain anonymous. Students who responded in the fall were surveyed in the spring with the same questionnaire to determine any changes in attitudes/perceptions within the group

of students.

Workshops

During the spring semesters of both years, black freshmen were invited to participate in workshops during which they were asked to provide feedback about the program. Black, White and Other Minority students were trained by the Counseling Center staff and the project director to promote small group discussion and to report their findings during an assemblage of all the small groups. During the spring of the second year of the project, the student group leaders were given two basic questions to ask the black freshmen: (1) What issues did you talk with your advisor about? (2) What issues did you want to talk about with your advisor but did not feel comfortable doing so? and Why? The facilitators were asked to record and turn in students' responses to the two questions.

Upon completion of the two questions, the group leaders were directed to ask open-ended questions about the students' satisfaction with the university and the program. A sheet of sample questions as provided to the group leaders to assist them with beginning the discussions.

RESULTS

Topics Discussed

A content analysis was performed on the issues listed on monitoring forms that were received from October through December

of years 1986 and 1987. All of the 1986 and 1987 issues occurring within one year were listed and then grouped together into categories which were judged to be similar. This grouping produced eleven categories:

1. Registration/Scheduling

   This section encompasses all discussion of the scheduling process as well as any discussion concerning the selection of courses.

2. Selection of Major/Major Area Advising

   This section was combined with Major Area Advising. It includes all discussions concerning the advisee's major including the selection of, the requirements for, etc. I suggest that we also include discussion of GURs in this section.

3. Course Advisement

   Combines the sections entitled: Courses and Grades, Problems with Courses, Referral to Course Instructor, and Dropping Courses. This section should include all facets of any particular course such as grades, assignments, tests, reading, instructors, drop/add, etc.

4. On/Off Campus Employment

   This section would include any discussions concerning an advisee's job including getting it, getting rid of it, problems with it, etc.

5. Referral to Other Services on Campus

This section includes discussion of or referral to other services on the campus such as the counseling center, tutorial services, the writing lab, the health center, etc.

6. Issues Surrounding Enrollment at TSU

This section will include plans to withdraw from the University, transferring to another school, admissions problems, transferring credits, etc.

7. Living Conditions/Personal Issues

This section touches the more personal side of the conversations between advisors and advisees. This section may include housing issues (on or off campus), others affect on advisee, family concerns, medical problems, university judicial charges, career counseling, etc.

8. Extracurricular Activities

This section covers campus activities that may not necessarily involve academics such as athletics, student activities/organizations, ROTC, etc.

9. Financial Questions

Covers all financial questions except those concerning job-related issues. Financial Aid, Grants, Scholarships, and other financial concerns are included in this section.

10. Questionnaires, Surveys, and Standardized Tests

Includes items given out by advisors or other tests given by the University. Examples include: Self-Assessment Questionnaire, TASQ II Survey, Vocational Aptitude Tests, TSU

Information Questionnaire, etc.

11. Discussion of Retention Program/Advising Issues

This section includes discussions of SBHE Retention project itself. Specifically, this section may include discussions about advising as a service to the advisee.

Two independent counts of the number of issues occurring within each category for each of the project years were taken. Table 1 lists the topics and their frequencies for the project years. Interrater correlations were .98 and .96 for years 1986 and 1987. These correlations were significant ($p < .01$). The majority of issues discussed were academic with a moderate proportion of social/personal issues as well.

In a similar manner, a content analysis of the issues discussed by 21 students who chose to attend the 1988 spring workshop was performed. The issues the students reported to have discussed with their advisors during the second year of the project were coded according to the same definitions used for the Content Analysis of the faculty monitoring forms. The topics reported to have been discussed by black students when with their advisors were course advisement (frequency = 14), referral to services (f = 10), registration and scheduling (9), living conditions (8), "general" (5), questionnaire/survey (4), major selection (3), and issues surrounding enrollment at the institution (1). The topic "general" was not further described by the participating students.

Discussion

The monitoring forms included examples which may have predisposed some advisors to solicit only academic information. As the primary goal of the program was to improve academic performance and thus retention, a focus on academic success was not considered inappropriate though possibly still a source of some error. However, students often brought personal issues to the advisors which precluded their ability to do their best in their coursework. As some faculty and students felt uncomfortable about talking about personal issues, the referral aspect of the advisor's responsibilities became essential toward the fulfillment of increasing academic success.

The major issues reported by the advisors and students were similar though not matching in relative frequency. Courses and grades, referrals, and registration and scheduling were the most frequently discussed by the sample of students who attended the spring workshop. However, personal topics occurred infrequently in comparison to the academic topics in both faculty and student reports.

Since advisors were frequently asked about registration and scheduling, they should avail themselves with as much information about this topic as possible. In addition to discussions of academic topics, advisors were often faced with assisting students with handling sensitive issues. Consequently, advisors might best spend their time becoming aware of the referral services that can

assist students with situation-specific problems regarding admissions, scholarship information, judicial charges, or pledging harassment. Advisors should be aware of each student's status regarding commuting, employment, financial aid, and joining social groups. These variables may load the student's schedule with nonacademic responsibilities that he or she may be ill-prepared to handle. Therefore, if advisors are well-informed about the most frequently discussed issues and related services, they will serve as accessible liaisons to services on behalf of their advisees. It would seem that effectively addressing students' academic and social needs should promote their academic success as well as good feelings about the institution.

Financial aid did not evolve from the content analysis as a major issue of discussion. In addition, there were few discussions that focused on race. Since both ethnic status and financial aid have been indicated as important risk factors associated with persistence, these omissions were considered to be quite important.

During the large group discussion of the spring 1988 workshop, two group leaders noted that some black students mentioned feeling too uncomfortable to discuss events which they perceived as racist with white advisors. Rather, these black students sought out black advisors to provide assistance in dealing with the problems. At the same time, a significant decrease in students' perceptions of racism by faculty was noted from an analysis of one item of the "Students Satisfaction Questionnaire" from the fall to the spring

semester of the 1986-87 program year. These results occurred at the same time more black students reported feelings of discrimination by other student groups on the same questionnaire. It is possible that by meeting with advisors, students' perceptions of faculty/staff racism were decreased. Inadequate contacts with students of other races may have fostered continued feelings of discrimination. It is also possible that an alternative explanation is true. It is also possible that familiarity with individual black students could have resulted in a different less racist behavior of the faculty/staff.

Conclusion

Only first-time black freshmen participated in this study. For this reason, the data cannot be generalized to represent all advising situations. However, it is evident from the issues discussed that black advisees need well-informed, knowledgeable advisors. Some authors suggest that minorities may need more intrusive advising to feel comfortable about using campus services when attending a predominantly white campus (Fleming, 1984; Groves & Groves, 1981). The data do support the need for many avenues to help black students with negotiating a predominantly white campus. Regardless of race, advisors can assist most students if they learn as much as possible about academic issues, and are provided suitable referral information. In the case of events that deal with racial issues, highly visible Minority Affairs Offices may be the responsive service to which black students can be referred.

In this manner, advisors become the key agents for promoting the comprehensive utilization of services to enhance the academic success of black students.

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TABLE 1

FREQUENCY AND RANK OF TOPICS DISCUSSED BY ADVISOR, REPORTED BY YEAR

	Fall			
	1986		1987	
Topic	R[a]	F[b]	R[a]	F[b]
Registration/Scheduling	(2)	72	(1)	55
Selection of Major	(4)	35	(3)	50
Course Advisement	(1)	111	(2)	51
On/Off Campus Employment	(7)	14	(6)	21
Referral to Other Services on Campus	(3)	42	(5)	22
Issues Surrounding Enrollment at TSU	(9)	7	(9)	7
Living Conditions/Personal Issues	(6)	17	(4)	25
Extracurricular Activities	(8)	9	(8)	8
Financial Questions	(10.5)	3	(10)	4
Questionnaires, Surveys, and Standardized Tests	(5)	18	(7)	11
Discussion of Retention Program/ Advising Issues	(10.5)	3	(11)	0

[a]R = Rank Order

[b]F = Frequency